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U.S. Agents Tell of Shielding Barbie

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

High United States Army intelligence officers paid and shielded Klaus Barbie as an informant for years after World War II, despite their knowledge that the former Gestapo officer was wanted in France for war crimes, according to a Justice Department investigation.

Accounts given to Justice Department investigators by former United States Army agents who worked with Mr. Barbie told of misgivings and internal struggles over American use of the former Nazi, disputes repeatedly resolved in favor of retaining Mr. Barbie.

Even an "arrest" was staged, it was said, and soon afterwards Mr. Barbie was freed to resume anti-Communist espionage on behalf of the Americans.

Adding to the sensitivity of the case, according to some of the former agents, is that the Americans also used Mr. Barbie to gather information on the French. One reason, they said, that American officials refused to turn over Mr. Barbie to the French, who were searching for him, was fear of what the former Gestapo officer could tell the French about American counterintelligence operations, including those directed against French Communists.

Smuggled Out With U.S. Help

Eventually, officials said, Mr. Barbie was smuggled out of Europe to South America along a secret American escape route devised chiefly to aid Soviet-bloc informants.

Last February the 60-year-old Mr. Barbie was extradited to France from Bolivia to stand trial for murders and deportations he is accused of having ordered as chief of the Gestapo in Lyons from 1942 to 1944.

Among other crimes, he is accused of torturing to death a hero of the French Resistance, Jean Moulin, and of transporting 43 Jewish children to the Auschwitz camp, where they perished.

A history of American relations with Mr. Barbie is being completed by Allan A. Ryan Jr., director of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations for war-crimes cases. Mr. Ryan said in an interview last week that he expected his report to be made public within the next few weeks.

Mr. Ryan has declined to discuss his findings, but accounts have been provided by witnesses who were interviewed in the investigation. The inquiry began in March after reports of Mr. Barbie's return to France led a former

American intelligence agent to acknowledge he had worked with Mr. Barbie after the war.

Repeated applications by The New York Times and other news organizations for access to Government records relating to Mr. Barbie have been rebuffed by Army officials on the ground that the matter remains under investigation. Some of the documents remain classified as long as 36 years later.

Many of those who have been interviewed by Mr. Ryan or his deputies in recent months have provided public accounts of their contacts with Mr. Barbie and the extent of their knowledge about his role in war crimes. Some of the accounts were recently broadcast in a BBC documentary in Britain and published in excerpts from a book by a British journalist, Tom Bower.

Interviews with many of the figures provide differing accounts of who in the Army knew what about Mr. Barbie.

Alert for Barbie in 1946

A former officer of the Army Counterintelligence Corps, Earl S. Browning, said his office was told in 1946 to watch for a fugitive named Klaus Barbie.

To his surprise, he said, the next year he received a request from the C.I.C.'s Munich region to use Mr. Barbie.

"It was a shock to me," recalled the retired colonel, who now works as a publishing executive in Washington. "Here he was being looked for — and there he was!"

Mr. Browning said he was aware that by 1947 Mr. Barbie was listed in the Central Registry of War Criminals and Security Suspects for murder.

Mr. Browning said he immediately ordered Mr. Barbie's arrest but that the order was resisted in Munich. Eventually, he said, Mr. Barbie was taken into custody and delivered to the Army's European Command Interrogation Center at Oberursel, near Frankfurt.

Justice Department investigators are said to have found indications that the "arrest" was a "friendly" one, largely for the sake of appearance, although there were reports Mr. Barbie fled and was recaptured during the trip.

'The Slate Was Wiped Clean'

According to Mr. Browning, after Mr. Barbie's interrogation in Oberursel, "the slate was wiped clean." Mr. Barbie was set free and soon returned to Munich to resume work.

Mr. Browning said he continued to protest but he was overruled by his superior, Col. David Erskine. However, Mr. Browning asserted that he did succeed in putting restrictions on the continued use of Mr. Barbie. These, according to Army documents found by Justice Department investigators, are said to have barred Mr. Barbie from gathering intelligence against the French and to provide for an end to his use altogether after 90 days. Apparently these restrictions were ignored.

Army documents uncovered in the investigation are said to show Mr. Browning's signature on documents approving use of Mr. Barbie. But Mr. Browning said he was only expressing the orders of his superior, Colonel Erskine.

The colonel, retired in Maryland, said he did not recall the matter.

U.S. Network a "Shambles"

Mr. Browning's account was substantiated by his deputy at the time, James Ratliff, a retired newspaper and publishing executive in Cincinnati. He explained the use of a known high-ranking Gestapo official for undercover work of questionable value as a consequence of the "shambles" and unprofessionalism of the intelligence network in Germany.

Another former agent said he told the Justice Department that Mr. Barbie's wartime role was no secret.

Erhard Dabringhaus, a C.I.C. agent in Munich and, by his own account, Mr. Barbie's "handler" in 1948, said: "They knew. We all knew. The people who hired him knew what he had done."

Now a retired professor of German at Wayne State University in Michigan and working on a book on the Barbie case, he said that when he learned of Mr. Barbie's past he asked for a transfer.

Mr. Dabringhaus said that by mid-1948 Mr. Barbie's main mission was to provide intelligence on Communist activities, including French Communists. He said an Army directive of June 1, 1948, shifted the target of intelligence efforts from Nazis to Communists.

Mr. Dabringhaus was succeeded in late 1948 by Herbert Bechtold. Mr. Bechtold, in an interview broadcast July 4 in London on the BBC Television program "Panorama," recalled drinking champagne with Mr. Barbie and discussing interrogation methods.

Asked about the morality of dealing with Mr. Barbie, Mr. Bechtold said, "I was just obeying orders."